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## Emerging iconographies and patrimonized deaths in Latin America:

Holy dead, miraculous dead and adopted dead

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## ABSTRACT

Ethnographically, I explore imaginaries in Latin American societies where death has a role and relevant agency; as well as its connection to some figures and emerging cults that claim to embody death as a self possession and heritage. From the Santa Muerte in Mexico, I will make a comparison to the processes of cultural patrimonialization of the death in other American societies. I describe the manufacture of miraculous dead —folk saints— in cemeteries, and the processes of «adoption» of Colombia's violence victims of unknown dead citizens —called dead NNs—. These emerging cults connect with the experience of its practitioners to take control of their lives in a precarious state of social vulnerability, homeless state institutions and formal structures. These are considered as «walking dead» that enjoy a very good health.

## KEY WORDS

Cultural heritage, emerging cults, violence, Holy Death, miraculous dead.

«I cannot keep talking of God, of life, when it reeks of death.»

With these words, Gregorio López, one of the vicars of the Cathedral of Apatzingan (Michoacán, Mexico) expressed ad nauseam and demotivation to the daily experience of living between horror and violence, in a territory occupied by the drug trafficking cartel of the Knights Templar (Chouza, 2014). In an ordinariness that «reeks of death» for millions of people in the Latin American societies, it seems difficult to bet and think about life before the absolute power and presence of death in the territories crossed by the suffering of the dead and the living.

In the last ten years, we have witnessed an increasing presence and visibility in the cities, fields, and cemeteries of Latin America of diverse figures that condense and embody in various modes the death as people with powers to intervene in the daily reality of their lives. It is the emergence of unofficial figures, not recognized by the Vatican, that appear to expand the pantheon of the popular Latin American Catholicism and with the people that come to seek their favor exploring new trades, contracts and exchanges. This article tries to make a first approach and comparative analysis of these emerging iconographies of death, based on privileged access to popular processes of *patrimonialization* involved in the development of these cults.

In the following pages I want to expose an ethnographic inquiry and comparative outline on this particular field in American societies. I am initially focusing on the use of the symbols related to the Santa Muerte and the Day of the Dead in Mexico, which I compare to the processes of cultural *patrimonialization* of death in other Latin American territories. Fundamentally, the ethnographic references that allude to this task will be the manufacturing processes of miraculous dead or popular saints in cemeteries of American countries like Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Chile, Cuba or Argentina. I will conclude this comparison with a particular kind of dead-the so called NN dead in Colombia-, and how in some locality of Colombia processes of «adoption» and appropriation of the remains of unidentified bodies and their conversion into miraculous dead are occurring.

In addition to presenting a summary of the conclusions of my previous work on this field<sup>1</sup>, I want to move forward and connect these cases

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1. (Flores, 2007, 2008 and 2009). Above all were the courses and seminars that have imparted between 2008 and 2013 in Xalapa and Merida, Perugia, Seville, Bologna and Lisbon, which have allowed me to deepen and share my ideas with researchers and lines of analysis on this theme. This work received funding from the R & D project (HAR2011-25988) Indigenous peoples and Modernity in Latin America (2012- 2014).

discussed with others who are part of evident cases of the *patrimonialization* of death in different societies of Latin America<sup>2</sup>, focusing preferably on rituals and mythical emphasis, in the «spontaneous» ways-and successful-of popular sanctification and miraculous creation of dead in cemeteries. On the term «emerging» to characterize these figures, these complex rituals and cults of Latin America, I am a debtor of the work of Manuel Marzal (2002). He was the first to coin the term «emerging cult» or «emerging indigenous cults» (Marzal, 2002: 551) in order to characterize some expressions of broad work that shared popular features of Catholicism, and to which we the social scientists were not paying much attention.

The reader will see that instead of using the terms «the faithful», «devotee» or «believer», the term «petitioner» is preferred for describing ritual practitioners of the various cults analyzed in these pages. I understand that it is more accurate and descriptive than those commonly used. It puts in the foreground the demand and the relationship and pragmatic exchanges established with death or the dead in question. When speaking of communication and ritual exchange of people with «popular saints» established in the graves of the cemeteries of Bogota, Losonczy stated that:

The difference between the notions of the faithful and the petitioner shows separation between a salvation centered perspective for the hereafter, and a religious attitude of appeal to supernatural entities around existential and everyday problems. This difference constitutes the dividing line between a theological religiosity and a more popular one, in contradiction with part of the Catholic dogma. Therefore, the use of the notion of the petitioner replaces the notions of the devotee (Losonczy, 2001: 11 n. 4).

In the following pages I intend to explore ways that seem to point us to a new symbolic and aesthetic order, but also to the expansion and transformation of the pantheon of mystical powers in these societies that share a substrate of popular Catholicism. Given what appears to be cults and emerging iconographies that exploit the topic of death as its own resource, it is important to hone our analysis and theoretical proposals.<sup>3</sup>

2. There are not many anthropological works with a theoretical ambition for the ethnographic study of death in Latin America. We can mention the work of Cipolletti and Langdon (1992), City, Ruz and Iglesias (2003), Flores and Abad (2007), Hidalgo (2011), and the particular value of the monographs of Calavia (1996) and Scheper Hughes (1997).

3. In order to address this theoretical challenge, the organizers of a seminar entitled *Theories and emerging practices in Anthropology of Religion* explained the reasons for the event in this way, «to retake the interest of anthropology from that *symbolic malaise* anticipated by Freud and postulated by Mary Douglas or Marc Augé, mulling on cultural and political

Although my interest here is primarily the intangible cultural heritage, I use a definition of cultural heritage of Hernandez (2008: 7) that emphasizes his character building process and selective negotiation of values, closely connected with power structures and the market, in a context of modernity. The figure with which the limited and paradoxical quality of cultural heritage can be characterized, is that of the zombie or living dead of modernity; in the words of Hernandez:

As we all know, zombies are hybrids of dead and living, people who died but not entirely, staying in the ambiguous territory of catatonic life, half death. Cultural heritage behaves like a zombie, you can enjoy better or worse health, but whose energy is the product of an insufflated life from the present by part of live instances that for various reasons are interested in rescuing fragments of the past. The patrimonialized zombie, hybrid product as son of modernity like the Promethean monster Frankenstein, therefore enjoys an artificial life. This a life connected to the machine of the present emergencies, a modern machine with various administrative, economic and technical devices extracted from the patrimonialized zombies meaty zombie fluids in the form of political-identity legitimacy and potentially exploitable commodity, but on the other hand it must regularly inject vital liquids, bureaucratic and rationally administered, to keep the zombie alive (Hernandez, 2008: 34).

*The patrimonialization* of culture can be understood as a new cult of the past, articulated in heritage rituals and in a production of meaning linked to both memory and remembrance (Hernandez, 2008: 32). We are facing a capital field in the production of meaning in contemporary societies, the area of memory that has been addressed even as a kind of global civil religion. The patrimonialized past becomes an object of modern cult (Hernandez, 2008), and it is where some of the most interesting debates are taking place, not only in Latin America but also in the rest of the world.

I am interested in studying processes of unofficial cultural *patrimonialization*, not led by expertise or political discourse. I will focus fundamentally on rituals and cults that *patrimonialize* death, which are not lead or planned «from above» or institutionally, but largely emerged «from below» with the protagonism of the working class.

From Anthropology and other adjacent disciplines we have few critical studies and analyses of the processes of invention and legitimation interested in cultural heritage<sup>4</sup>, lacking in particular the statements of

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sense of emerging religions and bringing our discipline to the analysis of its new manifestations and interpretations «(Cornejo, Canton and Llera, 2008: 13).

4. See the works of Flores (2009), Villaseñor y Zolla (2012), Fernández (2013) and Dosal (2014). In this sense the words of Villaseñor y Zolla are revealing: «The notion of immaterial cultural heritage has been received in an enthusiastic manner by the member states of

UNESCO Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. In this line it is clarified to the reader that we position ourselves in this text in a critical perspective.

## 1. The Holy Death and the Day of the Dead in Mexico

In the case of the Santa Muerte we are dealing with a cult which is one of the most remarkable Mexican contributions to the spiritual imagery and symbolic globalized repository (Flores, 2007 and 2008). It is of a cult and very modern ritual practice, emerging and newly developing in Mexico. The daily experience of the precariousness of life -socioeconomic crisis, violence and insecurity- among urban Mexican people, and especially in Mexico City during the critical decade of the 90s of the last century, seems to have had correspondence with an accelerated process of what we call «sanctification of death». We also are faced with a «canonized» or popularly sanctified figure, but not at all recognized as such by the Catholic Church, which fights against it with intensity in media and at the institutional level in Mexico.

The first evidences of the existence of Santa Muerte are dating from the first 60 years of the last twentieth century<sup>5</sup>, with very few people and in a familiar way, in the market of Tepito in Mexico City, where a family (that of the lady Enriqueta Romero) worshipped, first in private, in an altar dedicated to the image. This altar will not be out on the street and exposed to public view until 2001, according to lady Enriqueta, a pioneer in this action. In the 90s of last century, especially in its first half, in a period of intense social, economic, and political crisis and with an extreme boom of insecurity and daily violence in the Federal District that was never contemplated before, is when the cult of Santa Muerte «left» these altars and private prayers, and is brought with their images and objects to the public sphere. It appears in markets, streets, bodies (in tattoos, t-shirts and garments adorned with the merchandising of the saint), means of communication and cultural industries, especially in the capital, but quickly expanding

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the UNESCO, Mexico among them. But nevertheless, there exists very few critical analyses about the various social, economic and political phenomena behind the *patrimonialization* of cultural practices. The new conceptualization of the heritage by part of the cultural institutions are inheriting the vices of the traditional conceptualization, among which is found the essentialist vision of heritage, the material and symbolic appropriation of this by the hegemonic groups, the emphasis on the grand and spectacular, and the search for the conservation of the authenticity, defined from external optics to those of the subjects who construct said heritage» (Villaseñor y Zolla, 2012: 75).

5. In the novel *The Children of Sanchez*, Oscar Lewis (1964: 306) talking about women says, «when the husbands walk in love, we pray to the Santa Muerte».

to other major Mexican cities, and urban territories and migration crossroads on the US border. It has become a border cult for migrants, in competition with the Virgin of Guadalupe and Juan Soldado.

Without attempting to establish a correlation of cause and effect between the reality of violent deaths and the emergence and spread of the figure of Santa Muerte and devotion among broad layers of the population in Mexico, it is indeed very striking the political-social and vital context that this country has experienced in recent years, the same in which the cult of Santa Muerte has spread not only within the territory of the Republic but also beyond the US border. In other words, there is a close cohabitation between the increase in violent deaths and the rise of the Santa Muerte in Mexico.

Despite shortages and concealment of data available on those killed and forcibly disappeared, we can make a tentative approach to this reality from the Public Security report in Mexico from 2006 to 2012 that the organization Mexico United Against Crime (2013) had published following registration and analysis of various official sources of the Mexican government. For the six years from 2006 to 2012, in which the previous government led the so-called «War on drug trafficking» there is an estimate of more than 114,000 people killed (intentional homicide) according to data from the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System, and more than 26,000 disappeared forcefully, according to the Secretary of Government (SEGOB), which makes a total of more than 141,000 people who have experienced physical death, or social violence, a good number of these being officially considered «collateral damage» of the war on drugs on Mexican soil.

It is important to note that we are not facing a pre-hispanic relic, or a «colonial survival» although these are the theories that have been defended in the past decade from grey literature with no ethnographic support. On the contrary, it comes from the popular manufacturing and media complex of a ritual belief in effervescence, currently experiencing different lines and transformation processes.

In recent years the lack of ethnographic and theoretical material existing on the cult has been ameliorated. We only have two solid books on this worship, that of Chesnut (2013), which so far remains the most impactful work of ethnographic and theoretical depth, although centered in the neighborhood of Tepito and some altars of popular neighborhoods of Mexico D.F. The second is the master's thesis of Perla Fragoso (2007). Other articles and works of more limited scope but with contributions and lines of interest are those of Roush (2012), Fragoso (2011), and especially the text of Huffschmid (2012).

The main features of this successful and expansive phenomenon in Mexico, as identified in a previous work (Flores, 2008: 59-63) define the cult as:

- a) individualistic, accessible, utilitarian (does not need mediators or ritual specialists);
- b) with commercial logic (it initially arises in the Tepito neighborhood-market);
- c) mestizo, marginal, popular and middle class;
- d) «protector», pragmatic;
- e) Catholic and «cannibal»<sup>6</sup> (highly hybridized);
- a) transnational, virtual;
- b) urban, and increasingly rural / indigenous.

Against the more widespread opinion, the majority profile of «petitioners» of the Santa Muerte are not drug traffickers, criminals, prisoners and prostitutes, but corresponds with the group showing a state of social vulnerability that live an «irregular» modernity, using this cult to face their weak structural position (Fragoso, 2007: 45). They are ordinary people, that experienced suffering or social trauma, that feel increasingly abandoned-by the State, the official Church, and where merchants and street vendors condense an increasing majority of the devotees, as Fragoso identifies (2007: 53) and Huffschmid details:

And the traumatized are no longer only the most visibly excluded from the worlds of legality and formality, inhabitants of urban under-worlds as sex workers, transvestites or consumers or sellers of illegal substances. They also fall into this temporary space more and more, men and 'ordinary' women, neighbors and merchants, adolescents and elderly, belonging to vulnerable classes and violated, that after having gone through multiple abandonments are in need of new horizons of belonging and sense (Huffschmid, 2012: 105-106).

Those petitioners, from my experience in the Port of Veracruz (2007 and 2008) and as Fragoso recorded (2011: 12), are mostly Catholic. While his Catholicism is open to new searches and experiences: «We are Catholics, but otherwise» he explained a devotee of the Holy Death to

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6. It is not a syncretic cult, but a «cannibal», a devourer of aesthetic and plastic elements and senses of other traditions and provenances, which are juxtaposed without experiencing a merger - and sometimes a confusion, even in native logic of worship. It is a devotion inserted in the plural field of Mexican popular Catholicism, and at the same time is a hybridized and phagocytic cult of other agencies and symbolic profiles. We may regard the Holy Death as a mutation of the broader and more polymorphous pantheon of powerful Catholic figures, of their saints, of beliefs and rituals, and we can see their importance as an exercise of their flexibility when facing the new times, the new experiential realities of their devotees (Flores, 2008: 61-62).



Huffschmid (2012: 103). There are also practitioners of what Fragoso qualifies as «multi-religiosity» when linked to cults and rituals in booming in the D.F. such as Santería and Trinitarian Marian spiritualism (Fragoso, 2011: 12).

We are faced with an iconography that has been successful and chosen by structural groups involved in social vulnerability (Fragoso, 2007 and 2011: 10) and in multiple and permanent desertions<sup>7</sup>. Santa Muerte shows a double iconographic profile.

a) When reflecting a life experience where death is close and omnipresent, the Santa Muerte offers «an expression of a domesticated version of death fit for Catholics and families», said Alfredo Hernández, writer and scholar of popular Tepito culture (Reyes, 2010: 11).

b) You can contemplate and present yourself to the cult practitioners, exhibiting an overflowing iconography of terror, an aesthetic equivalent to «hyper-violence flooding the country» (Huffschmid, 2012: 102-103).

The predominant features in the imagery of the Santa Muerte would be to Fragoso (2011: 13) three: a righteous and equating Saint, a protective spiritual being and an entity that is «mother of all cycles», of changes and transitions —of constant motion.

Part of the success and boom that has taken this figure has to do with its high pragmatism —it is an incorporating cult<sup>8</sup>—, its dedication to solve small daily problems<sup>9</sup> —more than engage in exceptional miracles and multitude—, engaging the dirty work in a certain way that will demand thousands of petitioners, acting as a sort of trouble shooter (*Fontanera*) of micro-politics. We are facing one of the «dirty saints»<sup>10</sup> having greater visibility and power in Latin America. According to his

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7. «This will perhaps be the key to the enormous popularity of the Santa Muerte in times of multiple, religious, legal or social distresses: unlike other faiths 'The skinny one' (*La Flaquita*) welcomes any person without any prejudice» (Huffschmid, 2012: 105).

8. In an interesting work on the hybridization between Cuban Santería and the Trinidadian-Marian spiritualism, Ortiz and Lagarriga (2007) identified this development of new «utilitarian cults» in Mexican cities and especially in Mexico City, before increasing concern for reducing the problems of daily life and to solve more pressing issues, and less attention on believers of life in the hereafter.

9. She is asked that children do well in school, that they do not get addicted to alcohol or drugs, profitability in business or not to be fired in the work, protection against the «black magic» and spells, not to be assaulted or harassed, not to be arrested by the police, that the biweekly salary does not run out fast...

10. «However, all of them [the official saints] no longer seem to meet the new demands for shelter and protection, and enter the field called 'dirty saints' or non-canonical, that they are popularizing especially in poor areas of the city. The most popular in the Mexican capital, is undoubtedly the Santa Muerte» (Huffschmid, 2012: 98).

devotees, it is the most «effective» saint and is quick in granting favors, including competing with the advantage of other popular saints —but officials— like «San Judas Tadeo» —lawyer of difficult and desperate causes. As says Chesnut: «Many people told me they were devotees of St. Jude, but that it could take months for some favor to be received and sometimes it did not arrive, but with ‘The skinny one’ (*La Flaquita*) the miracle was quickly received» (Ceballos, 2013).

Stanley Brandes (2006 and 2007) has critically analyzed how the «Mexican» stereotypes (on and of Mexicans) about death, and the processes of *patrimonialization*<sup>11</sup> and policies of popular culture of national rank have shaped «death» as a cultural asset in this country. In this sense, the declaration by UNESCO of the «Day of the Dead» in 2003 as Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, has influenced this aesthetic, social and even ritual success of death in the social fabric of Mexico. It consists of a cultural, symbolic, and aesthetic complex, deeply mestizo (very Mexican to the extent of becoming almost a kind of «national holiday»), but appearing now as a strictly «indigenous holiday», although the argument of UNESCO allows it to be incorporated into the international tourism calendar under a product with a «local flavor with spectacle».

This tourist promotion of the «indigenous» tradition has the support of the Secretaries of Tourism of each corresponding state, and is occasionally promoted by performing altars of death, with instructions such as «do it yourself», so the novice tourists can make their own altar for the dead, if they follow the steps carefully, besides providing an explanation on the ‘meaning» of each of the elements of the altar, under the heading «Learn to build an altar of death» when one looks at the promotional web pages. There is a whole spread of the «Days of the Dead» on the Internet (Lomnitz-Adler 2006: 443).

From the 80s of the last century, there would have been an exaltation of the altars and the Day of the Dead, becoming an institutionally fostered ritual of Mexican national identity.<sup>12</sup> (Lomnitz-Adler 2006: 429

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11. For an approach to the process of cultural *patrimonialization* of death in Mexico, and its role in the constitution of the Mexican ‘identity’ and uses of Mexican nationalism, the most complete and key book is of Lomnitz-Adler (2006). Also useful are academic papers of Peace (1998), Bartra (1987), Westheim (1985) and a review of some literary and artistic works that have provided materials or contributed to the essential foundation for worldwide extension—including that of Rulfo (1955), or Lowry (1947).

12. The perspective of analysis of Claudio Lomnitz-Adler explores how death has become a national totem in Mexico, and has been used as a privileged vector in the construction of modern Mexican government and Mexican popular culture: «Instead of envisioning a popular culture of death that preceded the state and then the state manipulated or created a

and 438-439). These efforts have fueled the power of seduction that death as a traditional holiday has exercised, and continues to exercise on contemporary minds —national *mex*, tourists, intellectuals, artists, and international analysts—. Mexico has become a universal referent, a topic which we might call an aesthetic and an experience —allegedly— what would be a closer view of death as a cultural event, occupying a recognition and a place in the contemporary cultural imagery (Lomnitz-Adler 2006: 442). This coupled with the extreme dissemination of news and reproduction of images of ‘red note’ concerning deaths in the latent war in the country in relation to drug trafficking, in a social territory particularly prone to these things and the spectacle that death entails, has been a cultural ferment of development and condensation of this new «saint» which has earned the trust of millions of believers in their ubiquitous figure with her omnipresent power. In these scenarios, the only safe bet for many people is death.

From a symbolic, iconographic and historical view, devotion to Santa Muerte is not directly related, in principle, to the Day of the Dead celebrations, popular in Mexico between the mestizo and urban population in general. However, recently, both the rhetoric with which the media refers to the Santa Muerte, as the emphasis on content, elements of its symbolic profile, objects of power or offerings, are revealing a merger between the Santa Muerte and death as the protagonist of the celebration of Day of the dead with their altars for the dead and iconography of the «Catrinas» of the engraver Jose Guadalupe Posada.

These public identity discourses about death and the politics of popular culture that are converging in this strange *patrimonialization* of death and the Mexican, appear to have resulted in a popular movement of sanctification of death: a genuine independent agent, «an arbitrator without mediators» (Lomnitz-Adler 2006: 464) powerful but close, «holy» but present in domestic, public and work places, first among the marginalized or people with a more precarious existence, then among the humble, and now even among the middle classes fearful of the chaos that permeates their cities and their lives. An elusive and changeable figure of power, while ubiquitous, together with those familial deaths honored in shrines and mausoleums, is remarkably attractive to the perception of the middle-class, for the vital fragmentary life experience and for the enjoyment of the curious tourist.

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false image of the popular culture, the way the cultural construction of death gave form to the state and popular culture will be explored» (Lomnitz-Adler, 2006: 56).

## 2. Miraculous dead

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, in different Latin American societies the so-called miraculous dead, or popular saints are worshipped entities in which people spontaneously and outside of processes of institutionalization / canonization recognize a quality of living holiness that is unstable and in a constant process of manufacturing.

These miraculous dead are unique individuals who are exalted by their community after death (Franco, 2009: 212), impersonating victims who did not tune in to the social or political order. Thus, solicitors leave cards with their requests, votive offerings, objects related to the «life story» reworked over the specific dead, in the tombs of the cemeteries. It is not my goal to attain a comprehensive record<sup>13</sup> of them, although I will mention below those miraculous dead with a brief «hagiographic» synthesis of each- in which it is reiterated its «bad death» with bodily mutilations and extreme violence reflected on their bodies:

\* Salome Milagrosa (Bogota): There are multiple versions about her life (Losonczy 2001: 12): exploited prostitute, candle seller in the cemetery, laundress or maid. It is said that she lived in the barrio called Egypt or in the one called Perseverancia. She suffered from beatings from her husband and her children deceived her. She died in various forms according to her different devotees: uremia, burned, suffocated, drowned, killed by her mother or for revenge, mangled (they opened her body to get her heart, her breasts, and filled her body with sand and stones).

\* Amelia Goyri, «the Miraculous» (The Havana): A young lady, of Spanish origin and part of the Havana aristocracy, died young at 24 years old from an attack of eclampsia at eight months pregnant, running the same fate as her child. She was buried in a bronze coffin in the Colón Cemetery in Havana, with the body of her daughter placed between her legs, and being exhumed years later found her uncorrupted and with the body of the girl in her arms.

\* Botitas Negras (Calama, Chile): A prostitute<sup>14</sup> whose body was found by miners, with tall black boots and with a mutilated body: she was found without breasts or a scalp, missing nerves and skin of the face

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13. Above all it has been in the last decade when the strongest and most suggestive ethnographic works in this field appear. Important, among others, are the contributions of Losonczy (2001), Carozzi (2005 and 2006), Freitas (2007), Graziano (2007), Lozano (2007), Franco (2009) and Pávez and Kraushaar (2010).

14. The discursive confluence of sexuality, desire and violence, and the redefinition of prostitutes killed as popular Saints in Chilean mining towns is highlighted by the recent work of Kraushaar (2013).

and ears, and the hand, skin and tendons in the left arm and forearm, eaten by animals (Pavez and Kraushaar, 2010).

\* Jararaca and Baracho (Mossoró and Natal): The *cangaceiro*<sup>15</sup> Jararaca, was wounded and arrested by police after a shootout in Mossoró (Freitas, 2007). In the middle of one night, the police pulled him out of prison and buried him alive in the Mossoró cemetery in the Brazilian northeast. Another illiterate and petty thief, Baracho (Freitas, 2007), known as «the murderer of taxi drivers», after a forced confession escaped from various prisons until he was arrested in his favela of Natal and was killed in an abandoned lot by 18 shots, dying with thirst.

\* Machera (Merida): Venezuelan Malandro, fabulist and risky, who died of a hundred police bullets after an epic chase in which he disarmed and killed several policemen (Franco, 2009).

\* Maria Soledad Morales (Catamarca, Argentina): Kidnapped young, forced to use cocaine and then gang-raped by a gang of adult men linked to local political power. Her mutilated body was thrown into the street.

\* Sarita Colonia: An indigenous migrant from the provinces in Lima, where she had a hard and deprived life as a domestic worker and casual seller (Marzal, 2000: 554-556). She died young, at 26, and was buried in a common grave in the cemetery of El Callao and did not have a funeral. After her death, people began to visit her grave leaving candles and flowers because her reputation became miraculous. There are several versions of what her life was and of how she died. The most official indicates her death as malaria in a hospital, and the most popular records indicate that she was raped and then murdered. Over time, her devotees bought a plot of the cemetery and erected a mausoleum or chapel in her honor. In the words of Alejandro Ortiz: «It was a simple local person like any other, she was poor, died in anonymity and was buried in the mass grave (i.e., no one knows where). This identification of the marginal ones with the common life of Sarita should be one of the keys to the success of devotion» (1990: 201). It seems that the dockers of the port of Callao were the first social group that began to worship Sarita Colonia, but also marginal groups such as prostitutes, criminals and homosexuals. Today we face a highly popular cult of Lima, where migrants, indigenous and informal street vendors team.

\* Omayra Sanchez (Armero, Colombia): The eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in Colombia in 1985 produced an avalanche of ash and mud that buried the town of Armero. The media and television

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15. Bandit in search of justice and revenge for the lack of jobs or food (translator's note).

broadcasted live the agony of Omayra Sanchez, 12, who died tragically before the cameras without anybody that could do anything for her after three days soaked and buried in the wreckage of her own home. In the place that was her home a tomb was erected and has become a pilgrimage of thousands of people each year.

To answer the question asked by Freitas (2007, 66): —«What raw material makes a popular saint?»— This author recapitulates some features that characterize this social promotion of the dead: they were stigmatized in life, victims of violence (state, domestic, sexual, gender); they would also be sharing in many cases a sort of «social death» —that which generates stigma, abandonment, neglect, extreme poverty or persecution— before their physical death<sup>16</sup>.

Another shared trait would be that this is mostly «dead without owners» (without relatives to claim the body, identify them or provide them the funeral rituals patterned in such contexts). Despite this, appearing endowed with history and a strong symbolic meaning, they are appropriated or «adopted» by the local community (Freitas, 2007: 83) that is responsible for their funeral, or assumes a secondary burial<sup>17</sup>.

Among the mass of the dead from the past of a cemetery, the sanctifiers popular efforts are focused on what we call the most public deaths «indigestible» for its drama and violence. These are socially reconverted through a process that promotes the figure of the miraculous dead and popular saints (Freitas, 2007: 66-67).

What we see in some Latin American societies is the development of processes and strategies of ritual and mythical character, which can be interpreted from the perspective of a common cultural *patrimonialization* of death, with the purpose of facing the discontinuity of memory, forgetfulness and anonymity emerged from the political and social violence. In the ritual strategies the petition and the miracle appear repeatedly correlated and, as Losonczy points out they transfer a kind of «em-

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16. «Most of the miraculous dead are poor, weak and even strangers. Several of the stories of the miraculous dead tell us they died alone, without funerals, hungry, thirsty, without family and abandoned. It is long after their death that their body, 'in bones' tell some stories, they are found by someone who 'charitably' decided to bury him in exchange for some favor; and then as long as their 'effectiveness' is checked by the devotee they spread their miraculous power and build a 'chapel'. The contaminated power of a dead is transformed into protective and beneficial, thanks to the ritual solidarity» (Franco, 2009: 337).

17. The subject of secondary burials would be a trait that the miraculous dead or popular saints would share, both in Colombian cemeteries (Velasquez, 2009: 33) as in the Omayra Sánchez case, and Sarita Colonia, who are «taken out» by relatives or people that received some favor from them and are moved from mass graves, non sacred sites or small tombs, and now they erect for them a more individualized tomb or mausoleum.

blematic dead from the memories of the family to a ritual and mythical record of the shared memory» (2001: 12).

Expressing a different commitment to the relational model of Catholic patronage and more vertical dependence on the «favor» of the official saints, in the relationships established with these popular saints a model of an egalitarian and horizontal interchange—a «more equal partnership» is outlined says Losonczy (2001: 20). So the «petitioners» try to follow these miraculous dead with a more direct and individual logic, an agile access to achieve these favors.

Both in their words and in their ritual acts, petitioners and these popular saints inaugurate a kind of egalitarian reciprocity pact. Thus, we can focus the cult to the popular saints, from its offer of access roads and recovery of both their «agency» as political subjects (Losonczy, 2001: 21), at the same time that they facilitate the emergence of a new type of civil and collective memory, in outline, in construction—*«that heals the violent rupture of the old social relations and brings to light the edge of urban graves, a possibility for the entry of new subjects, a political space of citizenship»* (Losonczy, 2001: 22).

According to Freitas, this kind of worship would be allowing *«to deal with frames of public social conflicts»*. Through ritual, the local community would be showing a reading of the «unofficial» divergent history, from that conveyed by the public authorities of the time, through stories from the past or affirming the miracles of today (Freitas, 2007:84).

From the comparison of *ethnographies* produced on these cult figures, we can identify policies and even «legal» dimensions shared between the cult of the miraculous dead or popular saints of the mentioned cemeteries, and worship in Mexico to Santa Muerte. Solicitors turn in their daily lives and in critical times of their life cycle to ask for «favors» to these power entities—their letters or motions may come to resemble the narrative rhetoric of an instance or administrative «office»—which actually could be considered to be services provided by a conventional state in a popular logic of reciprocity. In the case of «Botitas Negras», her tomb is used by solicitors as an office or cabinet «of government»: *«We can see the sanctuary of Botitas Negras as a 'government office' that receives requests (letters) and gifts (payments), and the miraculous saint as minister of bio-politics theocracy that dispenses 'protection of life' and is involved with miracles, in support of the fragmented subjects that have been belittled by the 'invisible hand' of the neoliberal government»* (Pavez and Kraushaar, 2010 : 447).

These popular saints, miracle workers replaced the political and judicial actions in some contexts and scenarios of structural violence, inse-

curity and impunity, where the neoliberal state is absent and in permanent dereliction of duties. In this experience of everyday life and ritual practices, there is no place for «anomie»; the miracle<sup>18</sup> must settle the scope of the passions to contribute to a justice that is not obtained by right (Pavez and Kraushaar, 2010: 484).

### 3. Adopted dead

As my brothers have disappeared, tonight I hope the river brings me a corpse to make my deceased. To all in the port that has lost someone, we are missing someone, someone has been taken from us, we are orphans, widows. Because of this, daily we hope that the dead come into the murky waters between the palisades, to make them our brothers, fathers, husbands or children.

(Jorge Eliécer Pardo, 2008. Sin nombres, sin rostros ni rastros —story—)

To worship anonymous unidentified<sup>19</sup> souls is a practice already established in Latin American societies that seems to go beyond in Colombia, through ritual and artistic expressions that influence them to manifest a logic of «adoption» of the unidentified dead, NN dead<sup>20</sup> by solicitors in some localities and cemeteries in Colombia.

As the fragment that heads this section illustrated, the Colombian rivers such as the Magdalena or the Cauca reflect the traumatic reality that Colombia lives, full of death, violence and disappearances<sup>21</sup> during

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18. «[...] The 'government' of a popular saint like Botitas Negras allows to say the opposite: the miracle has in modern popular theology similar meaning that the jurisprudence, in the state of emergency, and consequently, the neo-liberal concepts of the state refer to 'salvific' theories of modern politics» (Pavez and Kraushaar, 2010: 476).

19. They are called in Peru «miraculous little souls» (Ortiz, 1990: 201), «Animitas» in Chile (Benavente, 2011), «single spirit» in Colombia (Losonczy, 2001), or «Animas del Guasare» in Venezuela (Navas, 1997; Franco, 2009).

20. From the Latin «Nomen nescio» without a name, name unknown.

21. According to 2010 data from the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences, a partial and incomplete count of 245 cemeteries in the country, recorded 10,048 dead NN —by that time there was missing data from an additional 800 cemeteries. In May 2011, the Institute of Legal Medicine estimated 12,724 unidentified dead NN. In 2013, 4,000 children appeared buried in cemeteries as Colombian NN unidentified dead, and the National Commission on Disappeared estimated 7,400 dead «lost» in cemeteries, assuming they were practically impossible to identify. The National Registry of Disappeared of that



decades of civil war, when used as makeshift mass graves moving the murdered, seeking their executioners to eliminate evidence of violent death and the identity of the person.

We have few works of analysis or anthropological perspective on the reality of the NN killed in Colombia. Most approach it from a partial way—Blair (2005), Velasquez (2009), Chaves (2010 and 2011), Vieira (2008) and Sanchez (2010)—or journalistic—Nieto (2012)—. The best and most complete work is Uribe (2011). There is a recent documentary by a Colombian artist Juan Manuel Echavarria (2013): «Requiem NN».

Here I am interested in comparing the funeral ritual practices and treatment of corpses in two stages of post-conflict Colombia; for this I will follow Uribe (2011).

In Beltran, belonging to the city of Marseille, a swirl of the Cauca attracts many remains of corpses, and before them there is an indifferent and more dehumanizing of those human remains installed in a standardized way and customary use—even with the handling of remains on the river in the games of children to leave school (Uribe, 2011: 42-43)—. Most of the time these remains are not collected and taken to the municipality to proceed to their possible identification and burial (Velasquez, 2009: 36). It also highlights a practice of obliterating the identity and even the very existence of those anonymous and unidentified dead. In declaring the Colombian Ministry of Culture to this cemetery in Marseille «Historical and Architectural Heritage» the Society of Ornato Municipal ordered the painting of white tombstones for over 400 NN dead who were found there, producing the «obliteration» of the few details (sex, year of burial of the remains) that could facilitate future identification (Uribe, 2011: 44-45). Villagers Beltran-Marseille do not feel concerned with the fate of human remains.

At the opposite pole, it would be the formula or social protocol exhibited by the people of Puerto Berrio—to the banks of the Magdalena river—and the treatment provided to those anonymous NN dead: with a practice of collection, care, adoption and «family integration» (giving

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institute recorded 91,352 missing persons in 2014, of which 67,999 people were still missing in Colombia, and of which 20,787 were classified as forcibly disappeared (<http://www.medicinalegal.gov.co/index.php/component/content/article/739> —figures-of-people-missing— in —Colombia-get-a-91352-records—). The dead NN came to constitute 67% of buried dead, as for example in the cemetery of Rionegro according to a report by the NGO «EQUITAS» (Guberek, Guzman and Vejarano, 2010: 36): 462 unidentified bodies were buried at some point in this cemetery. Colombian Equitas Consultants (Colombian Interdisciplinary Team Forensic Work and Psychosocial Assistance) have requested that the human remains of dead NN are declared Cultural Heritage of Colombia to facilitate their protection and identification.

even the names), teaching a conversion process in miraculous dead or popular saints<sup>22</sup>. Let us dwell on the sociocultural logic that is active there. These corpses or dismembered remains reach their shores, and are rescued and «adopted» by relatives of other missing dead (also thrown into the river or buried in mass graves) that were never recovered. This adoption means giving them a new social identity. Thus, you can read «NN Carlos» or «Sonia NN», or phrases of thanks. The people choose them to ask favors before vital crises and everyday problems, which generates a process of *patrimonialization* —from below, from popular and spontaneous character— of some of those NN dead «adopted» and re-named. This process of «endorsing» the body found, allows these families to exercise their right to share their grief, relieve their pain and fix the memory and remembrance of their loved one. The dead is also a disappeared victim of this extreme violence, whom they have not been able to make a proper funeral for or a place in a cemetery, like a small headstone, and thus be able to continue with their life.

I would like to conclude with a reflection on the agency of the subject implied in these new treatments and «contracts» established by the residents of Puerto Berrío with some of these NN dead. I do not mean in this case a «political» agency —as to which Kraushaar Pavez (2010) referred to the worship of Botitas Negras—, but a more basic agency with which to regain the initiative or some control of their daily lives. To begin with, the solicitor chooses the NN dead in the cemetery, and paints on the tombstone of the niche the word «chosen» (see Image 1). This election is a first step in the process of «adoption» initiated with this NN and the activation of a «contract» in which the parties will exchange gifts (the dead can grant the favors requested and the ‘adopter’ citizen is concerned with the care and attention of the grave, and the ritual dialogue with prayers and conversations with the dead at his grave). It is an exchange that slows or reverses the usual hierarchical positions among the official Catholic saints and the «devotees» who ask favors: instead of being the saint the «patron» in this relationship with the NN, the «solicitor» is who happens to sponsor the dead chosen from a multitude of graves of unidentified dead. It may be the case that a miraculous dead the solicitor initially chose does not work and is abandoned, and the dead can subse-

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22. This practice of adopting the dead NN is not exclusive to Puerto Berrío, we have some reference that is spreading in other parts of Colombia. This is the case of the Ríonegro cemetery —next to Medellín (Antioquia)— where the Spanish photographer Gervasio Sanchez already observed in 2010 that «*Some niches of NN have been adopted by anonymous citizens who, perhaps, seek solace for their own losses. The tombstones are gleaming; flowers, fresh, and are still guarded by angels on Greek pedestals. On one you can read: «N.N. Thank you for the favor received «»*» (Sanchez: 2010).

quently be chosen by another solicitor, and in that second option be miraculous for the new solicitor, as indicated by Uribe (2011: 41).

This ritual practice and dialogue, and the process of «adoption» which is dramatized, deserves a more thorough ethnography from the perspective and logic of kinship—in this case an established ritual kinship—and of the formulas that modernity introduced into the processes of transformation of these societies. The emphasis we get from both, the informants and the few available analyses, determine the existence of a «family of choice», a «recomposed» family in which the NN dead is not only «baptized» with their own name, but even gets to receive the «name» from which he was sponsored and adopted<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps it is interesting to identify where the limits of this «familiar» insertion are, checking if there is an «adopted» NN dead that ends up being buried in a family tomb—mausoleum, pantheon— along with the other deceased members of that citizen or adoptive family.

#### 4. Living dead

Our life depends largely on the type of agreement that we establish with the dead.

(Restrepo, 2000)

I was interested to approach the *patrimonialization* of culture—from the bottom up—that the subordinate sectors activate in these practices and rituals, condensed into figures of death and dead, towards a counter-hegemonic logic that makes the culture flourish as a process of disputing power (Wright, 1998: 137).

We face some specifically Catholic cults and ritual practices—their users are still Catholics—. Although it is a much more plastic, malleable and aesthetic ritual—that allows more changes and additions in the case of the Santa Muerte (such as necklaces of Santería, the speech of beings of light and the «energy» of the Marian-Trinitarian spiritualism, strength chains and testimonies of Pentecostalism), the logic and activated substrate is the popular Catholicism.

Based on the profiles of practitioners and users of these cults and rituals, it is important to note that a majority of them share a way of life immersed in informality and characterized by precariousness. They are

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23. «Another man told us he had chosen several NNs, giving them his surname; he visits them periodically and converses candidly with them» (Uribe, 2011: 41).

part of a band of the population that is especially sensitive to physical and social vulnerability, generated in a context of political, social and economic crisis and change.

They intensely suffer from the effects of abandonment of the state and its neoliberal policies on basic issues such as infrastructure, security, justice, social services, and most of the requests and demands to negotiate with these dead «saints» could be managed and resolved by a competent State. They are repeatedly amazed at how people who come to these figures seek shelter and protection against the most basic questions. These solicitors exhibit a literal profile of «homeless» of the state and government institutions.

They come to ask favors and requests to these figures of holy death, in a non-exclusive nor unique way, after checking the inefficiency, the «deafness» or the slow response of other saints, whether more official like the Virgin of Guadalupe, or more popular like San Judas Tadeo in Mexico. These figures allow communication and accessible and direct negotiation without special or complex mediations. Or, if you go to this mediation, this is very lax, not structured ecclesiastically and without the need to be permanent and marked—but rather tends to be occasional or intermittent.

The trait that perhaps more strongly connects the cult of Santa Muerte, with the vast panorama of emerging cults of miraculous dead in other parts of Latin America, is that in the context of ubiquitous presence and «power of death», a sector of the population (the most vulnerable) bid to strengthen their dialogue, deals and negotiations with these figures that embody death, taking its emblems, symbols, and making their own heritage, even to adopt and to integrate them in the family—as in the case of the dead NN of Puerto Berrio in Colombia—. Thus, seemingly paradoxical, death is turned into «valedora» (the one that validates) and into an asset for serving the solicitors their service—they even sponsor the death in the chosen NN in the cemetery. The solicitors acquire a little more agency on their lives, preventing the death threat surrounding them to continue «reeking their lives,» as expressed in the words of the vicar of Apatzingan spearheading this text. Therein lies the new «covenant»—this time not with the devil, but with the death directly, in which millions of people in Latin America are now betting.

The Santa Muerte—with a capital—, and those other dead or «dead ones»—with lower case— «chosen» or sponsored as agents and powerful allies for their lives, now seem to come to life as zombies, Living Dead as literal landscapes post-conflict and social vulnerability normalized by the hegemony of the neoliberal state in these Latin American societies of singular modernity.

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